

Student: Cynthia Lin
Partner Organization: Wisconsin Community Fund

KECIP application

Abstract: “Ears to the ground”

I am proposing to partner with the Wisconsin Community Fund in order to do a listening project among community-based organizations that are led by people of color and poor people working for social justice, anti-oppression, and self-determination. The purpose of this project is to create a deep working understanding of grassroots autonomy. The specific goals and benefits of this project will be:

- To understand how organizations frame their visions, where they get their political analysis, what sets and blocks their agendas and strategies, how they form decision-making structures and develop leadership, and how they position themselves relative to institutions and power
- To make a case for and to support grassroots work that seeks to create alternative, more democratic structures in which people affected by injustice are directly involved and have power
- To create a grassroots network of mutual aid and learning, connecting organizations led by poor people and people of color in Dane County with each other, as well as with other organizations throughout the state
- To contribute to the Wisconsin Community Fund's capacity to support and foster social change and social justice organizing in Dane County and the state of Wisconsin.

Project: “Ears to the Ground”

I am proposing to do a *listening project among community-based organizations that are led by people of color and poor people working for social justice, anti-oppression, and self-determination*. The purpose of this project is to create a deep working understanding of grassroots autonomy. I will gather insights and lessons from organizations about how they frame their visions, where they get their political analysis, what sets and blocks their agendas and strategies, how they form decision-making structures and develop leadership, and how they position themselves relative to institutions and power.

Such insights are critically important given an institutional context that marginalizes grassroots work. Responding to pressure to professionalize and to become mainstream, community groups often end up replicating within their organizations the same power hierarchies and oppressions as in dominant society. This work will contribute to the Wisconsin Community Fund’s (WCF’s) efforts to support social change and social movement building among community-led grassroots organizations. Also, it will provide community organizations with spaces for reflection, analysis, political education, and growth. This project is also directly relevant to needs in the area of community-academic partnerships, specifically the need for an enhanced understanding of and accountability to the realities of community organizing and social justice work. Additionally, this project will build and strengthen grassroots networks of mutual aid and learning in Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Community Fund (WCF) is a radical community fund under the Funding Exchange network. This project will contribute to WCF’s recently articulated goals of building stronger technical assistance and social movement building programs. In recent conversations, members of the grantmaking committee, board, and staff together discussed that there have been trends in the non-profit sector toward professionalization and mainstreaming, and away from radical political and anti-oppression work. We identified the need to better understand the impacts of these trends on grassroots social change organizing, a need that drives this project. Other WCF priorities that this project will address include: more authentic connections with and accountability to grassroots struggle, a deeper and more unified approach to racial justice, ongoing critical and political analysis, and ongoing collective reflection and organizational learning. This project will provide the WCF team with material and guidance with which to approach these activities for organizational growth.

In order to design a *project that addresses the questions that community activists are asking themselves*, I met with other local and regional activists to ask them what they as a community would want to achieve through such a project. I received much positive feedback from this group; people expressed the importance of sharing knowledge about successes and challenges in grassroots organizing. The questions I will ask organizations (see below, "Summary of Activities") stem directly from these activists' input. These questions also resonated with participants in a workshop called "Money and Organizing" that I co-facilitated at a recent Midwest Social Forum teach-in with a WCF board member.

I have been a member of WCF's volunteer, activist-led grant-making committee for almost two years, and I am also engaged in local activism and organizing with several community organizations. This work has afforded me a familiarity with what social change struggle looks like on the ground, and the dilemmas, tensions, and questions about vision that emerge in it. Since I started as a UW grad student in 2005, I have had great guidance in activist scholarship and navigating community-university partnerships (from faculty like Lynet Uttal, Randy Stoecker, Sue Thering). This project, and the support of the Kauffman Internship Program, will allow me the chance to partner with WCF and to apply my action research and analysis skills to the very real questions that we activists are experiencing in our work.

Summary of activities

1. Survey. I will first conduct a brief online survey of grassroots organizations in Wisconsin Community Fund's contact database and other contacts ("snowball" method).
2. Visits and interviews. I will visit and interview leaders and activists from an anticipated sixty organizations in Dane County as well as throughout the state (including Ashland Co., where WCF is affiliated with a number of organizations). Some of the interviews will be done over telephone, but I hope to visit as many as possible in person. Questions that I've generated through collaboration with other activists include:
 - a. What is your organization's vision for the world? How do you see yourselves getting there?
 - b. What is disabling this vision? What are the barriers?
 - c. How does your organization's agenda get set? (Is it set by what funding is available?)
 - d. How can we move away from the traditional non-profit model and create different kinds of organizations?
 - e. What is the organizational and power structure, and does your organization make decisions? How are staff, board, volunteers, and people affected by the organization's work involved? What are relationships like, and how do you define 'accountability?'
 - f. When do organizations 'stop being effective?'
 - g. Are there options for self-development of funds?
 - h. What sort of support and resources do you need to set up the infrastructure for social movements? At the local, state, and national level?

3. Compiling and sharing information. I will use my qualitative action research background to synthesize the knowledge and insights shared by the organizers and activists that I talk with. From this I will pull out the important messages, questions, and 'lessons learned' that are relevant to grassroots struggles, alternative organizational structures, and resilient social movements. I will share these findings with stakeholders in a number of ways, including:
 - a. **Report to WCF** to guide strategic planning, program development, reflection, and growth
 - b. **Report to grassroots organizations** (participants as well as non-participants)
 - c. **Production of zine publication(s) and brochure(s)** for organizations and community members
 - d. **Workshops and summits.** (See below)
 - e. **A MS thesis in Urban and Regional Planning**
4. Grassroots retreat and networking. This is the 'wrap-up' to the project, but I really see it as the beginning of ongoing networking, mutual support and learning, and movement building efforts among community-based organizations of poor people and people of color in the county and state. In November or December 2008, I will plan at least one summit or retreat with groups that participated, as well as others. The purpose of this (these) gathering(s) will be to share and discuss the findings, for organizations to learn about each other, and collectively brainstorm where to go from there. Our hope is that this project be a platform for creating and supporting grassroots network building for skill sharing, coalition and movement building, and united struggle for self-determination.
5. Evaluation. Evaluation will be an ongoing process in this project and will be based on measuring against the transformative potential of this project, both for WCF and for the organizations that are engaged. For WCF, I will be constantly dialoguing with members to gain qualitative insights about how the project contributes to organizational growth and learning, and about our ability to incorporate its results into the Fund's ongoing work. As far as determining transformative potential for organizations, I hope to find out how meaningful as much the engagement process as the findings are to organizations. I will send out a feedback form with the report and other materials. I'll also ask during retreat and workshops what these insights contribute to organizations' work and where they want to go with them, questions that will be integrated with planning and strategy making going forward. Many of the anticipated outcomes of the project fall in a time frame of six months to several years; my continued involvement in and tracking of social movement building will provide an opportunity for mid- to long-term evaluation. Quantitatively, impacts might be measure by the number of organizations connected to this project, and those who stay

connected. Evaluation goes hand in hand with future planning, and 'spin-off' projects that have already been suggested by activists that have been a part of the planning process include tools and a process for organizational discussion circles for political education, collective reflection, and organizational growth (as an alternative to 'strategic planning').

Time Frame (2008)

May	"First-round"/pilot interviews. Contact groups for surveys and invite them to do interviews.
June-Aug	Continue surveying and really start interviewing in earnest
Sep-Nov	Compile findings, analysis, and writing/production of reports and other
Nov-Dec	First retreat/summit to share findings, discuss, plan/vision for future.
Dec	Finish research, defend thesis. Wrap-up evaluation.

Benefits to the Community

In talking with other organizers and activists about this project, we find it critically important to connect local struggles—across urban and rural areas, different communities of color and low-income communities, groups organizing around different issues. This project will create and strengthen grassroots networks in Dane County as well as across the state. These are spaces in which community organizations led by people of color and poor people can hear each others' stories, to share important knowledge and experience that informs the work they do, and to support each other.

Through this project I hope to make a case for grassroots autonomy and for an increased sensitivity regarding relationships and structures in organizations that are empowering to community people affected by issues. I hope to strengthen approaches and understanding of social change work that contradict the dominant paradigm of social service-oriented altruism and paternalism. Many community groups I know have found partnerships with the university to be frustrating and often extractive of their energy and knowledge, as opposed to meeting their needs and growing their capacity. I think it is critical to strengthen an academic discourse that resonates with the 'view from the ground,' and I think this project will contribute to such a discourse. In so doing, I seek to play a part in opening the academy's wealth of resources, knowledge, and power to community groups, and in 'reclaiming' the Wisconsin Idea.

WCF has been a player in Wisconsin's networks for radical social change activism since 1982 and also has the capacity to leverage resources and political power to redistribute to the grassroots.

Because of this, the Fund sits in an important position to support the above community benefits, as well as to benefit richly itself from the project. This process will be potentially transformative for WCF, in growing capacity in the areas of needs identified in the project summary, above.

Benefits to the student

I will be able to complete my master's thesis through this project. However, I really see my graduate program as an opportunity and a space within which to apply my skills and knowledge to questions and problems relevant to grassroots organizing work as experienced on the ground, rather than as a benefit itself. Doing this work will deepen my understanding of and relationship with efforts toward grassroots autonomy. While my research and analytical skills will grow with this work, I am most excited about learning more deeply to navigate multiple and often conflicting needs of academic work and community work. In so doing, I will contribute to making a push for expanding space in the academy for community experiences and knowledge, as well as increasing the accountability of universities to community issues and eroding the power dynamic of "expert" knowledge privileged over people's knowledge.

This project will also help me to be a better, more confident activist and to learn how I can more effectively and authentically contribute to organizing. Some of the questions following me in my community work have been: How can I contribute to developing indigenous leadership and truly democratic organizational structures? How can I more effectively challenge the internalized oppressions and power hierarchies that emerge in social movements and community-based organizations?